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ABSTRACT

In 1987 the Toronto (Ontario, Canada) Board of Education launched the development of the Toronto Board Benchmark Program to establish benchmarks, which are samples of student performance on a wide range of language and mathematics tasks. These samples, in print and video, show what students in grades 3, 6, and 8 can do on learning tasks based on Ontario Ministry of Education and Toronto Board objectives. The benchmarks are not tests, but are information that provide insight into student performance and achievement. The benchmarks are intended to serve as models of appropriate assessment activities and classroom practices. To date, over 40 benchmarks have been developed for each grade. The holistic scoring criteria are presented for one mathematics benchmark and one language benchmark. Five levels of performance are identified. The use of benchmarks can reflect the fluid nature of learning and evaluating, and can allow the teacher to remain in control of the evaluation, unlike the use of externally developed and scored tests. (SLD)

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Toronto's Elementary Benchmark Program

Presentation at 1993 CCSSO National Conference on Large Scale Assessment

by

Sylvia Larter and Marilyn Sullivan

In June 1987, the Toronto Board of Education passed several recommendations that launched the development of the Toronto Board Benchmark Program. Three of those recommendations were:

1. That the Board initiate a system-wide plan to monitor student achievement in Toronto schools, such a plan to begin with mathematics and English based on a random sampling of students in the junior, intermediate and senior levels.
2. That the Board reaffirm the use of appropriate resources under the Curriculum Implementation Plan to offer support to teachers in strengthening their skills in evaluating student achievement.
3. That the Board initiate the development of a communications strategy to inform parents and other ratepayers on an ongoing basis of the nature of work being done by Toronto schools and the achievement levels the students attain.

The basic principles articulated in the remainder of the report were:

- Parents have the right to participate meaningfully in decision-making regarding their children's education.
- Parents have a corresponding right to know, in a timely way, how well or how poorly their children are doing in school.
- Parents are entitled to have their children's achievements determined in relation to system-wide standards.

Benchmarks are samples of student performances on a wide range of language and mathematics tasks. These samples, in print and on video, show what students in grades three, six and eight can do on learning tasks based on Ministry of Education and Toronto Board objectives. The Benchmarks give typical examples of what students in these grades can read; how well they write; how well they compute, measure and apply mathematics to everyday problems; and how well they speak and enter into discussion. Benchmarks show how students go about solving problems as well as the kinds of solutions they find. In most Benchmarks, five different levels of performance are identified with examples given.

Benchmarks are not tests. They are information that provides insight into student performance and achievement. The Benchmarks have been developed to provide a framework within which teachers can reflect both on their own programs and on ways to assess student achievement. They are intended to serve as models of appropriate assessment activities and classroom practices.

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Benchmarks have been developed at grades three, six and eight, since these mark the end of the primary and junior divisions and the end of elementary school. At each grade, 10 percent of the students were randomly sampled to establish the Language Benchmarks and another 10 percent of the students were randomly sampled to establish the Mathematics Benchmarks. For Language, each student spent approximately six hours in a one-to-one situation with an evaluator; for Mathematics, about five hours. For some of the activities, students gave their responses in a traditional fashion with paper and pencil. For other activities, students gave their responses orally and were recorded on videotape.

To date, the following numbers of Benchmarks have been developed:

	Language	Mathematics
Grade Three	**16**	**26**
Grade Six	**20**	**27**
Grade Eight	**14**	**26**

The Benchmarks are presented as a package, or library, of print and video materials. These packages are in every Toronto Board of Education school and are available to teachers and members of the community.

Benchmarks have been created through extensive use of observation and holistic evaluation and, because they are reference materials, not tests, allow teachers to continue to make use of observation and holistic evaluation in the daily evaluation of students. Most of the Benchmarks provide holistic scoring criteria and samples of students' performances at five levels. The following are the holistic scoring criteria for one Mathematics Benchmark and one Language Benchmark respectively:

Grade 3 Mathematics Benchmark

Curve and Ribbon
"Estimating and Measuring Lengths"

HOLISTIC SCORING CRITERIA

LEVEL FIVE
The student approaches the estimation and measurement tasks with insight and control. Appropriate tools are chosen (e.g. string for curve) and methods are accurate and efficient. Measurements are given with units without prompting. The student understands the concept of estimating and does so accurately. The student completes the task confidently, quickly and accurately.

LEVEL FOUR
The student approaches the estimation and measurement tasks with some initial confusion but, with prompting from the evaluator, seems to learn as the task proceeds. Some confusion is evident in the methods, choice of units and choice of tools. The student may not understand the concept of estimation and when asked to do so may attempt to measure. The string is used properly with the curve after prompting.

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LEVEL THREE
The student demonstrates a weak understanding of estimation and measurement. The ribbon may be measured accurately but the task involving the curve is approached inappropriately even after prompting from the evaluator. Confusion is evident in the methods, choice of units and choice of tools. The student seeks hints and approval from the evaluator.

LEVEL TWO
The student has a poor understanding of estimating and measures inefficiently and inaccurately. Tools are inappropriately chosen or frequently changed to no advantage. The use of the units on the tools may be confused. Measures are incomplete and wrong elements of the curve and ribbon are measured. The student may measure with a non-standard unit such as fingers. The student seeks hints and approval from the evaluator and requires considerable coaching.

LEVEL ONE
Very limited response or no response.

Grade 8 Language Benchmark

"Preparing and Giving a Talk"

HOLISTIC SCORING CRITERIA

LEVEL FIVE
The student is aware of the importance of both content and delivery in giving a talk. The content is powerfully focussed and informative. The issue is clearly defined, and detail is judiciously selected to support the issue. The talk is delivered in a style that interests and persuades the audience. Questions, eye contact, facial expressions and gesture engage the audience. The student displays evidence of social, moral and political responsibility, and offers creative solutions. Causes and effects are elaborated. The second version of the talk reveals significant changes based on revision after viewing. The student may make effective use of cue cards. The student is confident and takes risks.

LEVEL FOUR
The student is aware of the importance of both content and delivery in giving a talk. The student's talk is well shaped and supported with pertinent information. The student supports conclusions with facts, and makes connections between cause and effect. The talk is delivered in a style that may interest and persuade the audience. Questions, eye contact, facial expressions and gesture are used occasionally to engage the audience. Delivery is improved after viewing the first draft of the talk. The student is fairly confident and can self-evaluate.

LEVEL THREE
The student is aware of the importance of both content and delivery in giving a talk. The talk displays a noticeable order and some organization primarily through lists. The student includes some specific information, some of which supports or focusses on the topic. The conclusion may be weak. The student may show personal involvement with the topic and concern about the consequences of not dealing with the issues. There is evidence of revision as a result of viewing the first version of the talk. The student is fairly confident and can self-evaluate.

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LEVEL TWO

The student's talk contains some specific information with some attempt at organization. The main idea is unclear and facts are disjointed. Some paraphrasing of text is evident. The student uses no persuasive devices, has little eye contact or voice inflection and does not take a clear stand on the issue. The delivery is hesitant and incoherent. Little improvement is shown in the talk after watching the first version. The student demonstrates little confidence.

LEVEL ONE

The student chooses one or two details to talk about but the talk lacks coherence. The talk is confused and illogical. There may be no response.

The five levels of performance (presented as criteria and exemplars) define what Toronto students "can" do and represent the system standards. Because Toronto's student population is large and diverse in its economic, social, and cultural makeup, these standards provide sound and valuable information.

The holistic criteria describe:

- describe many problem-solving, process, and higher-order thinking skills;
- are true to the whole child performing a global task;
- reflect the complexity and inter-connectedness among the parts of the performance;
- include, in an integrated fashion, many affective variables such as perseverance, confidence, and willingness, and some metacognitive variables such as monitoring one's problem-solving strategies;
- and, because they were drawn from students' performances, incorporate many unanticipated, as well as anticipated, outcomes and skills.

It is in the use of Benchmarks by teachers that they become significantly different from traditional tests. Benchmarks provide valuable information and the intent is that teachers will shape how to use them. This means that a teacher would never attempt to administer, for example, all grade three mathematics Benchmarks on an individual basis to all students at the end of the school year and then report a long list of scores to parents. Instead, it is intended that a teacher exercise all her professional expertise and proceed with regular classroom activities with individual students, as well as groups of students, and evaluate students on an ongoing basis.

Student learning, classroom programming and student evaluation can then be blended. The Benchmarks have been designed to inform all aspects of this process. The use of Benchmarks can reflect the fluid nature of learning and evaluating, meaning that one can learn during evaluation and be evaluated while learning.

Benchmarks allow teachers to remain in control of evaluation, whereas the use of externally developed and scored tests negate the professional roles of teachers and evaluate students without recognizing the teachers' extensive knowledge of them gained through daily observations of performances on a wide variety of activities. The Benchmarks thus enhance teacher professionalism by giving teachers the freedom and, of course, the responsibility in choosing how to use the wealth of information in the libraries.

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In conclusion, Benchmarks improve the Toronto Board's ability to serve the needs of all the students by:

- establishing standards of achievement for the Toronto Board of Education,
- providing system-wide reference points to assist teachers in student evaluation,
- providing examples of the kinds of performance that lead to academic success,
- supporting teachers in their implementation of Ministry and Board objectives; and,
- providing more comprehensive information for reporting to parents.

The Board is committed to implementing the Benchmark program. It has made financial and human resources available to support Benchmark work. The school-based implementation model carries the following responsibilities:

- As teachers become familiar with the Benchmark program, they are responsible for ensuring that Benchmark principles are integrated into classroom programs and into evaluation of student achievement and reporting to parents practices.

- School principals and vice-principals are responsible for working with staff to develop a school plan to ensure that Benchmark principles are incorporated into school programs and evaluation practices.

- School superintendents are responsible for ensuring the development of school-based implementation plans and for supporting and monitoring the full implementation of these plans.

- Consultants are available through the family of schools to provide planning and implementation support to the schools.

For more information about the Toronto Benchmark Program, please contact:

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